President's Cryptic Note Is Latest Twist in Vesco Case

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White House officials tried yesterday to put the most innocent interpretation on the cryptic, handwritten note that has landed President Carter in the middle of a controversy over efforts to get the administration to settle the legal problems of fugitive financier Robert Vesco.

The Carter message to Attorney General Griffin B. Bell—"Please see Spencer Lee from Albany when he requests an appointment"—was written during a brief, Feb. 15, 1977, meeting with aide Richard Harden. During that meeting Harden told Carter that Lee was "offered a large sum of money" to arrange a meeting for Vesco associates with top White House aide Hamilton Jordan, but that Lee dropped the idea.

White House spokesman Rex Granum acknowledged yesterday that the note "could have been construed as encouragement" for the Vesco scheme. And officials said they couldn't explain why the president didn't mention Vesco's name in the note because Carter doesn't remember the meeting or the note.

But from talking to Harden, officials said, it appeared that the president wrote Bell to steer any future discussion of the Vesco matter to proper authorities in the Justice Department. "He wanted it out of the White House," one top aide said.

But Bell said he never got the note. Lee never called for the appointment. And until recently no one investigated the possibly improper approaches.

Disclosure of Carter's early knowledge of the Vesco matter has rekindled interest in a dispute that arose 10 days ago when columnist Jack Anderson wrote about approaches that a group of Georgians, including Lee, made to the Carter administration for Vesco.

Vesco, who has been living in Costa Rica, and more recently in the Bahamas, faces federal criminal charges that he looted a publicly owned company and then tried to buy his way out of trouble by giving $200,000 to the Nixon campaign in 1972.

Lee has said he was offered $1 million to set up a meeting for Vesco representatives with his hometown friend Jordan. But he said he was talked out of the idea by Harden, another friend and a Jordan assistant.

White House officials noted with irony yesterday that Harden has said he "protected" Jordan by not telling him about the Lee approach, but has involved the president instead.

Carter aides also said that Harden should have told other White House advisers—not the president—about Lee's deal with Vesco. But they said it occurred early in the administration and procedures for talking to Carter were informal, as they had been when Harden worked in Georgia state government.

Harden was questioned last week by the FBI in connection with the Lee approach, one official said. He added that he assumed the president would be questioned, too.

Securities and Exchange Commission attorneys who have been trying to protect the assets of Vesco's former company have expressed interest in the White House approaches. But SEC officials declined comment yesterday on whether they would seek to question Carter. Harden and other administration aides about the matter.

The White House disclosed the president's knowledge of the Vesco approach only after Lee filed an affidavit with the SEC expanding on earlier testimony to say that Harden had discussed the matter with Carter.

Lee said in a telephone interview that Harden had mentioned that he, Lee, could go to Bell if necessary. But he said he never called the attorney general because he had stopped representing Vesco associate R.L. Herring, the Albany, Ga., businessman who offered him the $1 million fee for access to Jordan.

White House officials acknowledged yesterday that the Carter note, the latest twist in the Vesco dispute, leaves the administration in an awkward situation because it raises questions about why the president didn't say anything to Bell about Vesco or order an investigation.